

A College President and Her Board:

Reflection on the Journey



I was sitting in one of the rooms at a union conference office. I was there because I was the vice president for academic affairs of one of the three colleges operated by that union. As member of the college board, I had been invited to attend a special meeting—the election of the college president and the three vice presidents. I was not alone in the room. Two laypersons who were board members were also there. They asked me about possible candidates—how adequately they were performing their jobs at the college, how well they related to others.

To me, it was not the right time, not the right place, not the right procedure. I tried to respond to their questions as best I could until we were interrupted. “The board chair wants to see you,” I was told. I went to his office. I had scarcely sat down when he said, “We have just voted you president of [another college within the union].” To say that I felt as if I had been hit by a bombshell is an understatement. I did not have the slightest idea that I was being considered for this position. My mind swirled with a mixture of hazy thoughts and emotions. Although I had not yet accepted the position, he told me that the board members of the college where I had just been elected president were waiting and that I needed to join them to assist in the selection of the vice presidents. I walked as if in a trance. I asked if I could be allowed a brief moment to call my husband so that we could discuss and pray about the decision. He said yes, but I should hurry.

When I entered the board room, all the men stood up and congratulated me as if I were a grand-prize winner. I was the only woman there. Their handshakes were firm and warm. “We’re so glad we could put you there.” “You will do well there.” “We trust you can make a difference.” I did not believe

what they were saying; my mind was asking why.

So, we went—my family and I. The lump in my throat was like a rock that would not budge.

Lessons From the Journey

While my journey with the board started poorly, it did not end that way. My succeeding encounters with the board were cordial and respectful. The board’s support as a body and as individuals was better than what I anticipated. Several lessons from this experience remain with me as an administrator and can serve as best-practice tips for working with college and university boards.

Planning board meetings. One of the venues where a college or university president can closely interact with his or her board is the board meeting. These meetings are very crucial as they mark the time when important decisions that impact the institution’s present and future are made.¹ Hence, the president and the board chair (who, in the Adventism system, is generally also the union president), in consultation with the other members of the board and the college administrative committee, must ensure that the agenda,² the logistics, and other aspects of each meeting are properly planned.

After my appointment as president, the first thing my administration did was to revisit the school’s mission, vision, and objectives; articulate our agenda for the next five years; formulate an institutional master plan; and review our institutional documents such as the faculty handbook, the student handbook, and other policies. Since the previous college administration did not have a board handbook, in consultation with the board, we created one. Getting these agenda items reviewed

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and approved was a priority during the first several board meetings, which were held once a month.

Our college board meetings, which were held during the monthly union executive committee session at the union office, were short: at most an hour or, at times, a little more when pressing and difficult matters needed to be addressed. Our college board was only one of the many boards (hospital boards and the boards of the two other colleges) that met in one day, with the union president serving as chair of all the boards and the same mission and union leaders as members. Hence, I ensured that I had discussed critical agenda items with the board chair and with the members and provided them with key points relating to specific issues prior to the meetings.

Although the regular board meetings may be held at a designated place such as the union conference office, at least once or twice a year the board should schedule a meeting on the college/university campus. Such meetings can occur at the end of the year and/or at the middle of the year. Being on the campus will give the board chair and the members the opportunity to meet faculty, staff, and students and get a feel for the institution's climate.

Seeking the board's counsel. One of the things that the former college president approved and left to me was the sale of a donated property, a farmland with fruit-bearing coconut and banana trees. "Very soon, the sale will be closed, and the payment will be made," he told me. Indeed, the money came. The next question was what to do with the proceeds of the sale. Upon consultation with the board chair and other members, I felt convinced that we should buy another property in honor of the donor that would generate income for the college. Unfortunately, some members of the college's administrative committee (AdCom), did not agree. A few committee members thought we should use the money for other purposes. I called the board chair and asked if he and the members of the board could come to the campus for a special meeting. Our campus was about nine hours away from the union office. Other members needed to travel about 15 hours. A few days later, the board came. They met the owner; toured the farmland, which was about 15 minutes away from the campus; and sat down with our AdCom. Based on the board's counsel, we voted to buy the property.

Relating to the local mission conference. As college president, I was invited to be a member of the executive committee of the mission in which our college was located. My membership on that committee proved highly beneficial. The college's

administration constantly looked for opportunities to interact with our constituency and for ways to have our faculty and students do the same. These initiatives were accomplished through creating an environment that valued collaboration, cooperation, and communication. We collaborated with our local mission in hosting youth camps and other mission-wide meetings. Through the cooperation of our faculty and students, we supported programs organized by the mission. Our district pastors and leaders served as faithful partners, helping us to communicate our mission and vision to our constituents.

One of the highlights in our high school department (also part of the college) was the annual Pathfinder Club inspection. It was a big event attended by parents, alumni, and even the local community. The mission officers and staff also came and served snacks to all 400 Pathfinder Club members. Although the mission office was about two hours away, the leadership continued this tradition year after year.

The mission president, who was a member of our board, and other officers frequently visited our campus. They did not come only for special events. They came on Sabbaths and on ordinary school days. And each time they came, they spent time with me as well as the other college officers and the faculty in informal conversations. Oftentimes they stayed for a meal. These times were always fruitful; we shared our dreams for the college and how to make those dreams come true. As a result, the local mission financed several of our projects.

Relating to the board chair. Now that I am teaching educational administration classes, I ask my students: "If you were a college or university president and you sensed that the chairman of the board did not trust you, what would you do?" They give me different answers such as: "I would not be af-

fectured," "I would win his or her trust," "I would avoid him or her as much as possible." My answer to this question is, "I would resign."

In any organization, trust is foundational. Between the president and the board chair, trust is key to a productive relationship. In trust-building, the president and the board chair can move from one level to another, either upward or downward. One phase of trust-building is gaining an understanding of the other person based on his or her character, competence, and communication.³

I regarded my relationship with the board chair as very important. I always reminded myself that I should trust him and also strive to make myself trustworthy. I consulted him especially regarding matters relating to governance; gave him regular

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updates about the college; discussed with him the agenda items for the next meeting; sent him and the other board members documents before board meetings so they would have time to review them, ask questions, and add items they deemed important.⁴ What I appreciated the most was that the board chair gave me permission to call him at any time. I was careful not to abuse this privilege, but it was comforting to know that if there was an emergency, even at midnight, I could consult him.

It is important for college presidents not to wait until problems have become overwhelming before notifying the board, especially the board chair. Many problems can be prevented or minimized when timely action is taken or when counsel is promptly sought. If the board chair does not offer, ask permission to consult with him or her when urgent matters arise.

Being a woman among men. Sometimes I am asked, "What was it like to be a woman among men?" I say it was a privilege. During board meetings, even though I was the only woman, I did not feel intimidated or discriminated against. The chair and the board members acknowledged my voice, and they welcomed my ideas.

Partway through my tenure, the board decided to form subcommittees. In these committees, we included women.⁵ Two of these women became members of the board. The first time one of them attended a board meeting, there was a long and serious discussion. After the meeting, she took me aside. "You made very strong statements. Weren't you afraid?" I told her that the test of the maturity of a board is its willingness to be challenged to address sticky issues with honesty and openness. As to the question whether I was afraid, I said No. A board, or any committee, should create an atmosphere where fear cannot thrive. Everyone should feel empowered to speak and, while observing propriety and respect toward others, must exercise that right freely.

A woman president may encounter negative experiences as she relates with the board, which in most cases are composed mostly of men. One participant in the study by Joseph confided that, at times, the jokes that the men exchanged in her presence made her feel uncomfortable. Another participant in the same study shared that her difficulty occurred when the board had to travel together, and she was the only woman.⁶

Two studies, Rosario⁷ and Joseph,⁸ however, affirm that women presidents generally have positive experiences with their boards. Participants in my study attested that when they were elected, they were received with warm acceptance. One participant in Joseph's study described her board as "very, very, very supportive all the time."⁹

Advice to Current and Future College/University Presidents

Get to know the board. It is important for the president to become acquainted with the members of the board in order to know how to effectively work with each of them. Perusing each member's curriculum vitae will give the necessary background information. Spending time with them both in formal and informal settings will also help; thus, the president should ensure that the board plans events that provide such experiences. The

president should also make the same effort to know the board chair and develop a positive working relationship with him or her, as this relationship is very crucial to the success of the institution. Bowen¹⁰ and Hiland described five levels of interpersonal dynamics between the president and the board chair: fact-sharing, idea-sharing, knowledge-sharing, feeling-sharing, and give-and-take.¹¹ As the board chair and president get to know each other better, both will be better able to openly disclose whatever is needful for informed decision-making.

Work with the board to evaluate academic administrators' performance. Holtschneider recommends that senior administrators of colleges/universities be evaluated by the board.¹² Ideally, this evaluation is done yearly, and, in our context, should include the vice president for academics, the deans, and the department chairs. If the evaluation is conducted in a spirit of confidence and trust, the feedback will be very helpful both to the person evaluated and to the institution.

Even if the board does not initiate or conduct evaluations of the college/university president, that individual can take the initiative and do a self-assessment. One of the skills that a college/university president should possess is the ability to self-critique.¹³ For some, this skill will develop over time. Self-assessment gives the administrator an opportunity to "stand off and examine [his or her] performance in perspective."¹⁴ This type of evaluation is based on an initiative taken by the president, driven by his or her desire to improve personal performance as a leader and to better understand how his or her performance affects the institution.

Suggest an evaluation of board performance. The president should tactfully suggest an evaluation of the board. In some parts of the world, boards do not generally evaluate their own performance. But since it should be part of the institutional vision to create a culture of quality assurance and accountability, the board should be part of this endeavor. Follett makes it clear that "the board must . . . analyze its own effectiveness."¹⁵ Scholarly studies attest that boards that undergo periodic evaluation perform better.¹⁶ These external evaluations can be performed by a subcommittee or the entire board. Holtschneider suggests that the board can assign a committee (usually the trusteeship committee) to take charge of the annual evaluation of the board.¹⁷

According to Boyatt, the board can also conduct a self-evaluation. It can ask itself these questions: (1) What are the strengths of this board? and (2) What areas of improvement should be addressed? When the board answers these questions candidly, it will be able to maximize its strengths and address its weaknesses.¹⁸

Represent the college/university to the board. The president is the face of the school that the board sees and the voice that the board hears. What he or she says about the college/university, its faculty and students, and its programs and how he or she says it, will influence the board's view of the institution. While unfavorable information necessary for adequate decision making should not be hidden from the board, the president should consistently endeavor to present

the institution, especially in the annual report, in a positive light and to give a hopeful picture.

The president should also create strategies that will enhance the faculty's relationship with the board. Some ways to bring the board and the faculty together are to create formal and informal platforms. Listed below are some examples of each.

- Formal approaches can include conducting panel discussions and forums, inviting some faculty to board meetings, and forming ad hoc or taskforce committees to address shared concerns.

- Informal strategies can encompass such activities as holding special events such as a board-faculty dinner or inviting the board to important campus activities.¹⁹ In some institutions, this is the occasion when the board chair announces important board decisions and recognizes exemplary performance of faculty members.

Diversify the composition of the board. Schwartz underscores that one of the most important functions of the board is to meet the needs of the college/university constituents.²⁰ With globalization, student bodies and faculty have become more diverse. But, as Fain observed, many boards have not seriously considered diversifying their membership.²¹ Hence, it seems imperative that every board should consider looking into the composition of its membership²² to determine “how much [it] reflects those whose future it holds in trust.”²³

Further, several studies reveal that having a mix of men and women on the board results in better performance.²⁴ Some countries in Europe have imposed gender quotas on corporate boards of public companies “to rectify the extreme gender imbalance.”²⁵ They require that there must be at least 40 percent women sitting on any given board. When it comes to diversification, however, gender is only one aspect. Examples of other aspects to consider include age, competencies, experience, areas of specialization, and interest.²⁶ Boards of Adventist colleges and universities may not choose to adopt a quota requirement, but they need to take a serious look into the composition of their board membership. In Adventist colleges and universities in Asia and some other parts of the world, a big majority of board members are men and pastors who have with little or no training or experience in higher education leadership.

Additionally, Holtschneider emphasizes the importance of selecting the right people. He expounds, “Only smart, engaged board members can ask the right questions and, in doing so, elevate the entire board's performance and contributions to the institution.”²⁷ One way, according to Holtschneider, to determine board composition is to start with the institution's vision. “We started by asking what we needed the board to accomplish. The answers shaped the way we thought about populating the board.”²⁸ This approach may not be readily applicable to boards of Adventist colleges and universities because most board membership slots are assigned by virtue of a person's leadership role in missions, unions, and other denominational institutions. The idea, however, may merit some attention, for the board is only as good as its members, and

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Provide board training. A study by Canosa reveals that many boards of trustees' members, when appointed/elected, are not prepared to serve due to lack of training and experience regarding what the role entails.²⁹ Hence, there is a need for orientation, training, and mentoring. While the initiative must come from the board chair, this matter cannot be left to chance. The college president must work with the board chair to ensure the provision of education and development programs to both new and re-elected board members. These are training sessions board members should be required to attend in person, or online if available. Higgs and Jackson offer three reasons why board training is a must: (1) to delineate governance and administrative roles and functions, (2) to orient boards to their legal responsibilities, and (3) to “provide a system of accountability.”³⁰ Orientation is given to each board member at the start of his or her term. In fact, Holtschneider suggests that during the recruitment phase, the potential board member must be informed why he or she is being recruited.³¹ Training may be provided once a year during board retreats and through online courses such as those available through the Adventist Learning Community (ALC) (see article by Ella Simmons on page 4). For board mentoring programs, a new member may be paired with an experienced one.

Thanking the board. The board chair and members are not paid for the work that they do for the college/university. While the president typically serves at their pleasure,³² they contribute their time and expertise. Many board members sacrifice their personal time and even their work hours to fulfill board responsibilities.

Hence, a fitting response to their service is gratitude. After benchmarking appropriate ways of thanking the board for their voluntary service, our school provided travel and took care of lodging and food expenses. While we did not offer a per diem, we did give a gift to each board member during Christmas and when they came to our campus. We also gave them products from our farm.

Expressions of gratitude can come in many forms—verbal and written, providing warm hospitality and giving careful attention to the needs of board members when they come to the campus, and giving appropriate gifts on special occasions. At the end of their term, a statement of thanks set in a plaque may be appropriate.

Conclusion

At the end of a president's term, one of those things for which he or she can usually be grateful is the guidance of a good board. If the president is honest, he or she will admit that whatever the college/university has achieved can be credited to the cooperative effort of the board, the president, and many others. The presidency is a privileged role because while the challenges are many, the president is not without support. And much of this support comes from the board. The roles of the board and the president are distinct but complementary, and one is incomplete without the other. ✍

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